Great win last night by the Indians, and a much needed one. That said, through 21 games ... the Indians have lost games in every conceivable way in 2009...and the calendar has not yet flipped to May. If the starter does well, the bullpen or offense stink. If the offense puts up some runs, the starter is dreadful or the bullpen blows it. The team just hasn't been able to get things clicking on all cylinders. This is the topic of Paulie C's latest column for us, and he goes inside the number to break down the Indians 8-13 start to the '09 campaign.

With Kerry Wood giving up a three-run jack to Jay Bay to ruin what was otherwise a wonderful night of tremendous baseball at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario on Monday night, I think it's official - the Indians have lost games in every conceivable way in 2009...and the calendar has not yet flipped to May.

What's disconcerting about that fact is that the Indians are not looking at one specific component of their team that is epically failing night in and night out; rather the blame is being shared by all three components of the team (rotation, bullpen, offense) with the wealth being spread pretty evenly. That is to say, if the starter does well, the bullpen or offense stink. If the offense puts up some runs, the starter is dreadful or the bullpen blows it.

Et cetera, et cetera...ad nauseam...

The team can't put together a complete game, despite the fact that the performances seem to be there from all three components (rotation, bullpen, offense)...just not on the same night. Does that mean that this is a "classic bad team", as some prevailing thinkers seem to think, where the team simply isn't talented or consistent enough to put together all the parts needed for the sustained winning needed to stay in any divisional race?

I suppose that's a possibility, although it could be looked at in a very different manner in that maybe the way they're losing isn't necessarily a bad thing as the cylinders all seem to be working, just not all at once, particularly when you look at the different components of the team in certain time frames instead of on a game-by-game basis.

I know that I've already hit on this rebound by the rotation, but it's important to look at this from a broader sense now that other aspects of the team seem to be crumbling:

Rotation's First 8 outings (Team's Record: 1-7)

37 1/3 IP, 42 ER, 53 H, 18 BB, 31 K

10.12 ERA, 1.90 WHIP in 8 games with an average of approximately 4 2/3 IP per start

Rotation's Last 13 outings (Team's Record: 6-6)

86 2/3 IP, 34 ER, 83 H, 30 BB, 45 K

3.53 ERA, 1.30 WHIP in 12 games with an average of approximately 6 2/3 IP per start

Considering that the 13-game stretch above includes a 2 inning, 7 ER effort from Reyes and a 5 inning, 5 ER effort from Pavano, you see that the rotation has shown significant signs of improvement, thanks to C.P. Lee remembering what he did in 2008 and to The Babyfaced Bulldog for his mind-boggling "ability" to induce GIDP.

If the rotation was the greatest concern going into the season, and the first week or so seemed to justify those fears, the leaps and bounds that the rotation has made (and rather quickly) are more than encouraging, particularly given that Lee, Carmona (whose last start finally looked like a replay of his 2008 may not be happening), and Laffey all look to be settling in at the top of the rotation.

With the calendar still reading "April", isn't that what we were looking for out of the rotation - at least a couple of pitchers establishing themselves while the back-end-of-the-rotation sorted itself out?

However, with the starters playing appreciably better, how has the team not taken off, given that the rotation is what was holding them back when the season started?

The answer is pretty simple...not too long after the rotation started to post Quality Starts and settled into some semblance of consistency, the other two components blew up. First up was the bullpen, whose struggles are well-documented and remain the great disappointment in the young season:

Bullpen in 2009

6.34 ERA - 26th out of 30 MLB teams

.916 OPS against - 30th out of 30 MLB teams

1.69 WHIP - 27th out of 30 MLB teams

While those stats don't include Tuesday's game, in which they were forced to clean up a Reyes mess and attempt to rein in the runaway locomotive that is the Red Sox offense, you get the idea on this. Think about the fact that two relievers in the bullpen have an ERA under 3.00 (Sipp and Chulk) and one reliever on the roster has a WHIP under 1.40 (Sipp)...and neither of those guys was on the team on Opening Day. Considering that Sipp's only thrown 1 2/3 innings, what we're watching is a epidemic in the bullpen of not being able to record outs with any consistency that is only finally finding a vaccine.

Of course, the bullpen may be finding some consistency with the excellent debut of Tony Sipp, the potential corrections being made by Rafael Perez, and the emergence of Rocky Betancourt, whose seemingly-high ERA is skewed by a Choo non-play in the Bronx. To this point, all the Indians have needed was some consistency from one or two pitchers out of the bullpen and it

FINALLY started after the relief corps tried to give away last Wednesday's game after Laffey's brilliant start against KC.

In fact, from last Thursday's victory to Kerry Wood's 9th inning on Monday, here is what the Indians' bullpen put forth over 5 games:

13 2/3 IP, 2 ER, 9 H, 4 BB, 14 K

That's a 1.31 ERA, a 0.95 WHIP and a 3.5 K/BB ratio for a bullpen that looked to have finally turned it around. Yes, it's still a work in progress (any bullpen is)...but positive signs are just that and should be recognized as such.

But still the Indians failed to put a winning streak together, despite an improved rotation and a settling bullpen...must mean that the offense fell apart,

right?

Unfortunately, yes...as the offense's ineptitude sabotaged the turnaround of the rotation, then the bullpen by putting up these numbers from the 22-4 rout to the mastery of Tim Wakefield's knuckler on Monday:

.218 BA / .304 OBP / .321 SLG / .625 OPS with 5 HR, 27 BB, and 49 K in 8 games

That's 2.5 runs a game when your starters have turned the corner and your bullpen is finally showing signs of life. That's going to be an anchor for any team...and I don't mean anchor in a good way.

Obviously, the Tuesday outburst helps, but it almost feeds into this notion of not putting together a

complete game as the offense contributes on a night that another component of the team (on Tuesday, the rotation) makes sure that the team falls short of putting forth a complete game.

That's what has been so frustrating about this team, in that every game seems to only present the team with another opportunity to see which aspect of the team will fall short of that nice, clean victory. Honestly, how many games this year have been those nice, relaxing experiences when the Indians build an early lead with an assist from a quality start then go to the bullpen come in to quietly put the game away?

Why is it that the rotation sabotaged the beginning of the season, only to right itself, then to see the bullpen give away leads while the offense pounded out runs?

Why is it now that the rotation has settled in, with the bullpen showing positive signs that the offense has disappeared?

When the pitching is there, the offense is not...

When the offense is there, some component of the pitching is not...

Is this a sign of a bad team, with too many holes to overcome on a nightly basis, or simply a team still attempting to put together all three components of the game, simply waiting for that extended run after everything comes together?

I still tend to believe the latter (although in full disclosure, I've been called a pie-eyed optimist more than once) only because the pieces all are there for the Indians to go on a sustained run to put them squarely in the mix in the AL Central. If the

Indians get all three components running at full capacity, with the offense putting up consistent numbers on the scoreboard while the rotation contributes 6 quality innings, handing it over to the progression of relievers that finally seems to be developing, the Indians can very easily build some momentum towards working their way back into the race without much difficulty.

The standings tell us that they've played 21 games now and they are already looking at a mountain to climb to get back to .500 at that magical 40-game mark that is looked upon as a point in the season when legitimate evaluations can be made on individual players and changes made.

So if evaluations and changes aren't imminent and the Indians seem only to need to put together a level of across-the-board consistency to put together a run, the question comes flying out - when is that run coming...and at what point does

"relax, it's early" start morphing into "it's getting late"?

Right now, it's a question without an answer...though that run would certainly be a welcome surprise as it would mean that the Indians would be winning games every conceivable way, instead of losing them.